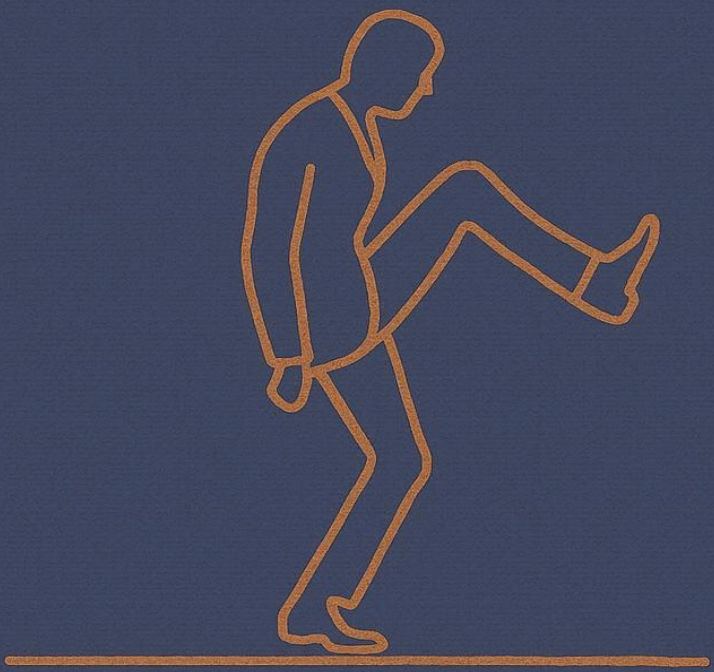
MINISTRY OF SILLY PROFS



ALBA PRATALIA

MINISTRY OF SILLY PROFS

Nathan often wondered whether people acted like idiots on purpose or not.
There was an elegance to the first option — idiocy as choreography. The noble art of being stupid with grace. A Monty Python sketch of civilization, where everyone bowed, tripped, and saluted in sync.

But the second option — the one Experience kept whispering about — was uglier. It meant people weren't pretending. They genuinely believed their nonsense was wisdom, their noise was music, their TikTok quotes were philosophy.

Hope said, *surely no one's that unaware*.
Experience said, *hold my beer*.

It had been the **International Congress of Fracture Mechanics Under Fatigue** — a title so painfully specific it could've been mistaken for a cry for help. Still, there she was, giving the opening keynote: *"Women in Engineering."*

All right, sure. Why not.

There had been, rumor had it, a janitor with a talk prepared — *"Who Actually Cleaned Your Labs: The Role of Janitors in*

Science." But it was cut from the program. Not enough funding for irony, apparently.

So the woman took the podium and began. Pacing up and down, for effect. With Marie Curie.
Who, for the record, was *not* in engineering.
And she pronounced it "Marié Curié."

Somewhere in Paris, the pages of Curie's radioactive notebooks quietly wrinkled in shame. Nathan looked up at the ceiling, scanning the constellation of tiny spotlights above the stage, praying that just *one* had been left slightly unscrewed, just *one* millimeter off-thread — enough for gravity to reclaim its dignity.

Give a speech generic enough, and you'll find cops and robbers agree on it.
Murderers and victims, bankers and the poor — all nodding in rare, idiotic harmony. Because you'll have spoken about *nothing* in a very *convincing* way.

For a politician, that's the ABC — the sacred catechism of doing things without doing a damn thing. For a college professor... well, same manual, different font.

People who don't know academia expect academics to be geniuses. Or at least *mad* geniuses — the kind who enter

classrooms doing a silly walk and reciting Achille Campanile's essay on the difference between asparagus and the immortality of the soul. Preferably backwards, for extra grant potential.

But if you gather people from industry, the intelligentsia, the general public, and then drop in one of these supposed academics to deliver a perfectly empty sermon — with carefully crafted PowerPoint slides, tasteful transitions, and bullet points polished like gravestones — you'll see the crowd's face shift into collective betrayal:
"I didn't come here for this. My CEO, banker, boss, or wife bullshits me *better* than this."

So what, you're telling us Nathan was an academic?
Oh no, no, no — hold your horses, wipe your shoes, lower your expectations.

Nathan was the **janitor**.
The one who'd been preparing his own little talk — *"Guess Who's Been Cleaning Your Labs: The Role of Janitors in Science."*
Rejected, of course. Too relevant, too practical, too⋯ true.

He wasn't in the room to present. He was there to listen, out of curiosity and maybe a bit of masochism. Sitting quietly at the back, hands smelling faintly of disinfectant and floor polish,

watching PowerPoint philosophers explain to one another how empathy could be quantified using a four-color pie chart.

And when she mispronounced "Marie Curie," Nathan didn't groan out loud. He just looked at the ceiling — at that row of mini-spotlights — and thought, *if one of you could just loosen a screw right now, you'd be doing mankind a favor.*

Anyway, most of the screws had been tightened to at least the *minimum torque*, because she made it through unharmed.

How do we know it was *most* of them? Because she paced during her speech. Up and down. Rehearsed, practiced, rehearsed again — top convincing, top selling. So effective in her delivery that Nathan, from the bottom row, counted at least a dozen checking their cryptocurrency portfolios and three openly scrolling Pornhub. (And let's be clear — *definitely not about her.*)

Now, how does Nathan know about screw-tightening torque?
He doesn't.
We do.
We, the omniscient narrator. Nathan knows nothing.

Some efforts are needlessly done.
Like killing the very concept of metrics to write:

"I know that I must do what's right
Sure as Kilimanjaro rises like Olympus above the Serengeti."

You're already a band named after a movie dog — or an Italian comic actor — writing a song about a continent you've clearly never visited. You don't need to *try that hard*.

Jorge Luis Borges once said the *Qur'an* is obviously authentic, because it never mentions a camel or a palm tree.
If you wanted to fake something Arabic, that's the *first* thing you'd shove in there, isn't it?

And, of course, Borges had never actually read the *Qur'an*.
You can find camels all over it — *6:144, 7:40, 16:5–7, 88:17* — and palm trees sprouting at least in *2:266, 6:99, 19:25, 50:10, 55:11, 56:28.*
So much for the quote-lovers who stop reading once the sentence fits their wallpaper.

Dario Fo said that mediocres copy, geniuses steal.
And, as if to prove his own point, that's Molière's line.

So, who was she?
This *Marié Curié*-raping professor of ours?

Well, if you have to ask, you're a blessed soul. Stay that way — ignorant and happy.

Because, of course, she's the next department head.
Dean-track.
Senator in a few years, if she keeps her bullshit consistent and her LinkedIn updated.

Does she mean anything in this Nathan story?
Only as much as the barrel means to the fish being shot into — no more than a general restraint.

So why mention her?
Because it's due. To academia. To humanity.
But mostly to Nathan, who never had the time to mop up all the drool she left on the floor while kissing asses on her way up the career ladder.

But Nathan's done mopping now.
So we're done with her too.

Why is there gravel on a driveway?
a) To look nice.
b) For friction.
c) To shred the knees of anyone unlucky enough to fall on it.

You might say it depends on the point of view — the eye, the wheel, or the kid's knee. But that's a phony answer. The real one is simpler:

Because it's *bad.*

It's ugly, it scatters when you drive over it, and when you fall, it grates you like parmesan. Gravel isn't a design choice; it's the world saying, "I've stopped trying."

If you can't be like gravel — if you don't have that blessed, malign talent to annoy and abrade everyone and everything at once — then don't bother being at all.

Who do you want to be? One of those people who hide arrogantly behind a finger: those who won't choose, won't take sides, never commit. The ones who call themselves left-wing and democratic but keep lunch with everyone — *just in case* — and will praise "the virtues" of the right while smiling at fundamentalists to avoid an argument.

Be a nuisance. Be like gravel.
Be like Nathan.

Nathan stood by the window of the half-lit corridor, mop leaning against the wall, eyes turned toward the strange evening.

You see that high pressure up in the sky? he thought. The air too clear, the light too sharp. The world holding its breath before deciding whether to freeze or rot. But at night, the fog exhales softly—the god of winter punching his time card again.

Somewhere an airplane droned its escape song. Somewhere else, a piano was trying and failing to find Mozart in itself—same wrong notes, same honest failure. Nathan liked that piano: out of tune but persistent.

He felt the weight of damp courtyards, of cars rusting in forgotten fields, of letters that would never be sent because the mailbox had long since given up hope. He could smell the diesel ghosts, the stale metal breath of chimneys, the long corridors of industry going nowhere.

The sky above the town was a bruise cut into stripes by vapor trails. Everything—roads, rails, and people—led nowhere in particular. And the voice of the fog, or maybe the air-conditioning, whispered the same refrain: *we're not, we're not, we're not.*

Nathan heard it all, saw it all, felt it all.
He was, inconveniently, still *being.*

It wasn't the best thing to be, but he was still working on a way out of being it.
Give him time.

Nathan sat on the back steps behind the building, half in shadow, half in the weak light leaking from a corridor window. The mop

bucket beside him had gone still, the water inside thick with silence.

Still here. Wondering. Pretending it's nothing.
As if time weren't a tax we all pay at the same brutal rate, as if past and present weren't both salted with the same taste of regret.

He knew it, and you would've too: how things slip away. How days rise like floodwater and drag along the small, defenseless things that once made sense — a conversation, a smell, the faith that some detail mattered. Everything gets carried off eventually, and what's left behind feels paved over, a meadow buried under asphalt.

To remain like this, floundering in the shallow end of nothing, guarding old memories like they were currency… was that patience or punishment? Was it endurance or cowardice? Nathan couldn't tell.

So he sat there — naked, in the way that weariness strips you. The season around him wasn't one of warmth or cold, only the trembling point where things blur: the still and the moving, the ending and the beginning, rain and not-rain.

He looked up at the dim sky and thought that maybe this was all that was left — not hope, not despair, just the thin breath between the two.

Nathan sat inside the night as if it were a waiting room no one ever called him out of. The clock ticked, but time refused to move—each minute dragging across his skin like sweat, each hour swinging down like a scythe.

What is there, really, at the bottom of this kind of night? When even the dogs have stopped barking, and the hour of the wolf just whimpers somewhere under the ribs? When the promise of dawn is nothing but a rumor, a train that's been delayed forever?

Darkness whistles in the distance, a sound with no end. Nathan listens. Breathes. Exists because he hasn't yet figured out how to stop.

His thoughts wander like strays kicked out of a church—unwanted, nervous, muttering their own psalms. He imagines tiled halls in second-class stations, where ghosts of travelers wait for trains that never come. He imagines roads folding over roads, endless loops of lonely adventures.

He sees clowns in the night — makeup cracked, smiles borrowed — and empty suitcases stuffed with the props of imaginary tragedies.

And somewhere between all that — the dog, the station, the clown — Nathan sits perfectly still, as though the world might move again if he just waits long enough.

Nathan thought of his old friend—his companion of thoughts, of years spent chasing meaning and losing it again. Twenty-five years, maybe more. A lifetime packed inside a handful of afternoons, coffee cups, and cigarette smoke. They sometimes said, with that lazy nostalgia reserved for people who know too much, that it felt like yesterday. But they both knew it wasn't. Yesterday was gone; today was the echo pretending to be it.

Time had been a sly thief with both of them. Nathan had grown old almost immediately, as if youth had been a bureaucratic form he'd filled out wrong. His friend, on the other hand, had never really been young at all—one of those people born already tired of everything.

Who could tell the young how many times you can be wrong before you get tired of starting over? Wrong until disgust becomes your daily companion. Wrong until the idea of hope feels like a practical joke. And yet, the world keeps rolling on—careless,

perpetual—building every new beginning over the corpses of the old. Every bright idea born from a dead one. Every joy nailed to a cross of tears.

Nathan remembered the days when they thought they were living: lying in the sun, talking about nothing, convinced they had understood life simply because it hadn't yet contradicted them. The loudest laughs, the absurd nights, the imaginary adventures in cities they never reached, the women they never met. And then, at last, the one they did:
"She's smart," Nathan had said. "She reads *Edgar Lee Masters.*"
As if that were a credential of the soul.

He remembered the cigarettes smoked in anger, the jeans that never quite fit, the few coins that always felt like less. The years came and passed quietly, like water under doors. They said, "We're old now." But what were they, really? Old men or just two mirrors facing each other, reflecting the same illusion forever?

Nathan always claimed he didn't want to understand anything. But understanding is a disease that spreads in silence; the more he denied it, the more it consumed him. He'd stare into that immense emptiness that sits behind every thought—until exhaustion took pity and gave him sleep.

And then, every morning, like a cruel encore, he would wake again. Incredulous. Reluctant. Still alive. Still there. Waiting for himself—his questions, his nothing, his pain.

And still—this friend, and that friend, and those buddies—gone. All of them.
Bullet-proofed now behind the Kevlar walls of profession, respectability, mortgages, and the instinct for self-preservation that comes right after the instinct for life.

Where was the crew that once sailed with him through nights of chaos and laughter, that roared approval at every bit of idiocy and half-planned mischief?
Where was that strength they'd mistaken for youth, that wild noise that made even failure sound like freedom?

Gone. Extinguished. Vanished into the thin, polite air of adulthood.

Nathan looked out at the sails — hanging limp, colorless, slack as surrender.
The ropes swung idly in the void, tapping the hull with a rhythm too tired to be called a beat.
Thud. Pause. Thud. A slow metronome counting nothing.

Above him, the sky had turned to pewter.
Strange birds circled high, performing some frantic, senseless choreography against the ash-colored heavens.
They sang a song, yes — but it was muted now, the melody half-forgotten, the notes struggling to rise in a world that no longer echoed.

Nathan watched until the last bird became a dot,
and thought — perhaps this is how joy leaves us:
first flying, then fading, then forgotten in the clouds.

There are songs Nathan can't listen to anymore.
Not without that familiar pressure building behind the eyes, not without the tears coming like an old reflex — the kind you don't fight because it's already too late, like a kid with a punctured bike tire who still tries to pedal home.

One of them is that song about Michel — the one that sounds like a letter written long after the mailbox has been sealed shut. Two boys, side by side, growing up on parallel tracks. Laughing, fighting, teasing, drifting apart in the lazy cruelty of time.

It isn't really about Michel, of course. It's about the thousand small things that got lost in the flood: scraped knees and paper soldiers, the smell of dust in a summer room, that first, ridiculous

tenderness before the world arrived — with its rules, its girls, its goodbyes.

Every time the melody starts, Nathan feels it again — that impossible ache of remembering not just a friend, but the *you* that only existed beside him. The version of yourself that disappeared when he did, leaving behind a silence that no grown-up dignity ever learned to fill.

Another song Nathan can't go through anymore without tears is *Father and Son.* Cat Stevens. Or is it Youssuf now? Hard to keep track. The man changed religions like others change SIM cards.

Nathan never understood the whole switching-faiths thing. Cassius Clay did it, became Muhammad Ali — and fine, the man could punch gravity itself — but still, why trade one celestial subscription for another? It's like changing homeopathic treatments: same nothing, different bottle.

If you really have to pick a new phone company with a direct line to the little ghost in the sky, at least choose one that doesn't force half the planet to dress like postboxes — *Boris Johnson's line, don't shoot the messenger* — or outlaw the very concept of liquid joy.
No booze? No wine, no whiskey, no beer? The horror. The *horror.*

In short, Nathan thought, why switch from oral pills to suppositories?

He wiped his face, sniffed, and let the song play on anyway — because even heresy can't save you from a well-written melody.

And then there are songs that aren't meant to be *listened* to — they're meant to be *inhabited*.
Songs to be heard, sung, and finally understood with a half-empty bottle of wine in front of a stubborn fire. Songs that make you nod slowly, that make you feel older and wiser in the same motion, even if you're neither.

One of those songs was about a man who wanted a black horse and silver spurs, to catch up with the life that had slipped away — quietly, without even saying goodbye. He wanted a braided lasso, woven of bull and guanaco, to rope in the dreams that had escaped him, the ones that still run wild out there somewhere, just out of reach.

He wanted a poncho the color of the roads — dust and distance, sorrow and smoke — to wrap himself in the night of his own fate.

Nathan listened to that one differently. It wasn't nostalgia; it was recognition. The man in the song was no longer a stranger. He was just another janitor with calloused hands and a heart full of

unswept corners, looking for a horse, a lasso, a poncho — anything to ride out the emptiness a little longer before dawn.

Nathan tilted the bottle, took a heroic gulp — a quarter gone in one act of liquid faith — and felt the night lean in closer.

He whispered to no one in particular:
Now I'm all alone, fretting over the stars,
Watching the simple march of those who stay behind.
Sing to me, drunkard, steal me into your dreams,
Calm down my wine before some master claims me.
Let the wine that comes slow drench me,
Let the man who's content speak my name,
Let him draw out all the pain from within.

Cántame borracho, róbame a tus sueños,
Sosegame el vino, antes que me salga un dueño.
Que me moje el vino que viene lento,
Que me nombre el hombre que está contento,
Que se saque todo el dolor de adentro.

The fire cracked in agreement, the bottle glinted like a conspirator. Nathan stared into the flames and saw nothing reflected there — no past, no future, only the quiet exhaustion of a man who'd scrubbed too many floors and found no meaning in their shine.

And to you, hypocrite reader — yes, you, who came for irony and stayed for despair — wrap yourself in your poncho, stoke the fire with the mop stick, and drink more.
While the Pampa lies indifferent and silent, wide as the truth, and full of gravel.